

California's Child and Family Services Review System Improvement Plan	
<b>County:</b>	Stanislaus County
<b>Responsible County Child Welfare Agency:</b>	Community Services Agency
<b>Period of Plan:</b>	10/1/04 – 6/30/05
<b>Period of Outcomes Data:</b>	Quarter ending June 30, 2003
<b>Date Submitted:</b>	9/30/04
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<b>Submitted by each agency for the children under its care</b>	
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<b>Signature:</b>	
<b>Submitted by:</b>	
<b>Name:</b>	County Chief Probation Officer
<b>Signature:</b>	Jerry Powers

## Stanislaus County System Improvement Plan

### 1. Local Planning Bodies:

Stanislaus County's Child and Family Services Division and Juvenile Probation Department participated collaboratively in the development of the Self-Assessment document and System Improvement Plan. The outcomes reflected in the Outcomes Matrices reflect Child and Family Services Division supervised children only, as the state works to address the issues of outcomes for children supervised by the Juvenile Probation Department. Most of the strategies in this System Improvement Plan reflect that which the Child and Family Services Division will address. Strategies to be implemented by the Juvenile Probation Department are so indicated.

Stanislaus County has a long history of close and collaborative partnerships with agency partners, community based organizations, the Foster Parent Association, stakeholders and other community groups. Our Child Welfare Services (CWS) Advisory Board was representative of most of the stakeholders and partners whose input is essential to the completion of the Self Assessment and the development of the System Improvement Plan. Outreach was completed to solicit the participation of other key stakeholders and agency partners that were not regularly in attendance as part of the development of the CWS Redesign Core Team and for the completion of the California Child and Family Services Review (C-CFSR).

The Child Welfare Services (CWS) Advisory Board was the primary steering and approval body for the Stanislaus County Self Assessment and the System Improvement Plan. The Advisory Board, whose membership is listed below, participated in the in-depth analysis of the outcomes and system factors, as well as providing oversight and direction in the finalizing of the full assessment. The System Improvement Plan was developed in a series of collaborative brainstorming sessions, known as Self-Evaluation, that was developed as a means of evaluating outcomes and systemic changes as part of the implementation of the Family to Family Initiative. The members of the CWS Advisory Board were invited to attend this forum, as were other community and agency partners. The ideas and plans developed within the Self-evaluation group were also presented to the CWS Advisory Board for further discussion and decision-making.

Members of the Child Welfare Services Advisory Board include one or more representatives from:

Community Services Agency, Child and Family Services Division  
Behavioral Health and Recovery Services, Children System of Care  
Court Appointed Special Advocates  
Health Services Agency  
California Youth Connection (CYC)  
Faith-based community partners  
Foster Parent Association  
Foster Family Agencies  
Stanislaus County Office of Education  
Kinship Services  
Former Foster Youth  
Sheriff's Department

Probation  
Community Based Organizations  
Valley Mountain Regional Center  
Superior Court, Juvenile Division presiding Commissioner  
CalWORKs/TANF and Integrated Services  
Parent Consumer

**2. Share Findings that Support Qualitative Change:**

Since early 2002, Stanislaus County has had a functioning Self-Evaluation group as part of the implementation of the Family to Family Initiative. That group was the basis for the stakeholders and agency group that engaged in the in-depth analysis of the outcomes and systemic factors necessary as part of the C-CFSR Self Assessment and System Improvement Plan.

The Self-Evaluation team used data from the U.C. Berkeley web site, Family to Family outcome measures, and the production of a number of business objects reports. The workgroup met weekly with a team of internal and external partners to discuss and analyze the outcomes and systemic factors. Additional focus groups were brought together, such as the Foster Family Agencies in operation in Stanislaus County.

The following pages include the selected System Improvement Plans (SIP) for the identified target outcomes.

**Outcome/Systemic Factor:** Recurrence of Maltreatment

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**County's Current Performance:**

**1A.** Percent Recurrence of Maltreatment (Federal Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
01/01/03-12/31/03:	10.6%	11.1%
10/01/02-09/30/03:	10.3%	11.3%
07/01/02-06/30/03:	13.4%	11.2%
<i>National Standard:</i>	6.1%	

**1B.** Percent Recurrence of Maltreatment within 12 months (State Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
01/01/02-12/31/02:	17.2%	14.9%
10/01/01-09/30/02:	16.4%	14.8%
07/01/01-06/30/02:	16.4%	14.6%

**1B.** Percent recurrence of maltreatment within 12 months after first substantiated allegation (State Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
01/01/02-12/31/02:	14.2%	13.1%
10/01/01-09/30/02:	14.2%	13.1%
07/01/01-06/30/02:	14.8%	12.9%

Stanislaus County exceeds the National Standard and the State average for Recurrence of Abuse on the Federal Measure and both State Measures.

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**Improvement Goal(s):**

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1. Reduce Recurrence of Maltreatment (Child & Family Services)
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2. Improve data entry into CWS/CMS (Child & Family Services)
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**Strategies:**

1. Comprehensive Assessment of Safety, Risk and Protective Capacity (SRPC)
2. Implement Differential Response (DR) in a target geographic area or population.
3. Expand use of team decision-making strategies, such as Family to Family Team Decision Making (aka: Family and Community Team meetings), Family Decision Meetings, Integrated Services case staffing and coordinated case planning, Interagency Resource Committee and other community team decision making processes.
4. Work with C-CFSR data team and State to improve statewide outcome methodologies.

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**Milestones:**

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**Timeframes:**

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|--|-----------|
| 1. Finalize SRPC with State, train CWS staff, test, and implement in accordance with CWS Redesign Teams. | June 2005 |
| 2. In accordance with State/County CWS Redesign  | June 2005 |
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teams, develop plan for initial implementation of Differential Response, develop community partnership capacity, train CWS and community partners, and implement DR in a target area or neighborhood.

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|---|-----------|
| 3. Finalize protocols for team-decision making and family participation in case planning. Expand current Family and Community Team meetings to all removals. Expand coordinated case planning for CWS/TANF Partnership cases. | June 2005 |
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| 4. Finalize procedures and train staff on data entry Protocols for entering referrals into CWS/CMS. | June 2005 |
|---|-----------|
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**Describe how the strategies will build on progress and improve this program/outcome area.**

- Consistent safety, risk, and protective capacity assessment completed by all social workers throughout the life of a case will improve consistency of assessment.
- Increased family & community involvement in decision-making and case planning will improve services to children and families.
- Differential Response will provide earlier intervention/services to families at risk.
- Data/outcomes will become more accurate.

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**Describe systemic changes needed to further support the improvement goals.**

- Expand current practices of inclusion of parents/family/community in case planning, early intervention.
- Expand Differential Response beyond initial target area/population.

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**Describe educational/training needs (including technical assistance) to achieve the improvement goals.**

- SRPC finalized by State/County CWS Redesign teams.
- Training for CWS staff and community partners on SRPC through Regional Training Academy.
- Clarification/development of consistent methodology for data entry into CWS/CMS.
- Query language used by the State shared with the County.

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**Identify roles of the other partners in achieving the improvement goals.**

- Community, agency, and neighborhood partners' involvement in Differential Response development and implementation in target area/population.
- Community, agency and neighborhood partner participation in training for SRPC.

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**Identify any regulatory or statutory changes needed to support the accomplishment of the improvement goals.**

- Confidentiality: sharing of information with community, agency and neighborhood partners.
- Longer periods of voluntary family maintenance services in order to safely maintain children in the home.
- Expand timeline for case planning to 60 days to allow for family and community participation in case planning.

**Outcome/Systemic Factor:** Rate of Abuse and/or Neglect in Foster Care

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**County's Current Performance:**

**1C.** Percent rate of child abuse and/or neglect in foster care (Federal Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
04/01/03-12/31/03:	0.53%	0.90%
01/01/03-09/30/03:	0.66%	0.87%
10/01/02-06/30/03:	1.86%	0.81%
<i>National Standard:</i>	0.57%	

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**Improvement Goal(s):**

1. Reduce child abuse and/or neglect for children in foster care.
2. Improve data entry into CWS/CMS for abuse and/or neglect in foster care.

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**Strategies:**

- Develop consistent training across County and Foster Family Agencies (FFA), through the Modesto Junior College Foster/Kinship Training Planning Committee, which address issues, which prevent abuse and/or neglect in foster care.
- Family to Family Initiative implementation, eg. Foster Parent Recruitment, Training & Support, Family and Community Team meetings.

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**Milestones:**

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**Timeframes:**

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|---|-----------|
| 1. Identify issues for training across agencies, eg. Discipline.<br>Develop plan for consistent countywide training.                                    | June 2005 |
| 2. Training for CWS staff on statewide developed operational<br>definitions of abuse and/or neglect in foster care, and any<br>other data entry issues. | June 2005 |

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**Describe how the strategies will build on progress and improve this program/outcome area.**

- Training for foster families will improve parenting/disciplinary skills, supervision, etc.
- Interagency partnership and consistency in training of foster families, through Modesto Junior College, will improve the quality and quantity of training services offered to foster families.

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**Describe systemic changes needed to further support the improvement goals.**

- Additional resources for recruitment, training and support of foster families.
  - Improved matching of children with foster families, through team decision-making strategies.
  - Coordination and collaboration with Foster Family Agencies toward developing consistent philosophies and values.
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**Describe educational/training needs (including technical assistance) to achieve the improvement goals.**

- Technical Assistance for data entry into CWS/CMS.
- Training for County staff and FFA's regarding innovative/effective strategies to recruit, train and support foster families.
- Query language used by the State shared with the County.

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**Identify roles of the other partners in achieving the improvement goals.**

- FFA, County and Modesto Junior College collaboration in developing common vision and training goals.

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**Identify any regulatory or statutory changes needed to support the accomplishment of the improvement goals.**

- Consistent rate structure for county licensed foster homes to assure adequate families at all levels of care.
- Access to licensing violation, de-certification information by new agencies considering certification/licensure.

**Outcome/Systemic Factor:** Rate of Recurrence of Abuse and/or Neglect in  
Homes Where Children Not Removed

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**County's Current Performance:**

**2A.** Percent rate of recurrence of abuse/neglect in homes where children were not removed  
(State Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
01/01/02-12/31/02:	12.5%	9.5%
10/01/01-09/30/02:	12.6%	9.5%
07/01/01-06/30/02:	12.7%	9.5%

Stanislaus County exceeds the State average for the Rate of Abuse and/or Neglect in homes where children were not removed.

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**Improvement Goal(s):**

1. Reduce Recurrence of Maltreatment in Children Not Removed (Child & Family Services)
2. Improve data entry into CWS/CMS (Child & Family Services)

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**Strategies:**

1. Comprehensive Assessment of Safety, Risk and Protective Capacity (SRPC)
2. Implement Differential Response in a target geographic area or population.
3. Expand use of team decision-making strategies, such as Family to Family TDM, Family Decision Meetings, and Linkages case staffing.
4. Work with C-CFSR data team and State to improve statewide outcome methodologies.

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**Milestones:**

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**Timeframes:**

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|---|-----------|
| 1. Finalize SRPC with State, train CWS staff, test, and implement in accordance with CWS Redesign Teams.  | June 2005 |
| 2. In accordance with State/County CWS Redesign teams, develop plan for initial implementation of Differential Response, develop community partnership capacity, train CWS and community partners, and implement DR in a target area or neighborhood. | June 2005 |
| 3. Finalize protocols for team-decision making and family participation in case planning. Expand current Family and Community Team meetings to all removals. Expand coordinated case planning for CWS/TANF partnership cases.                         | June 2005 |
| 4. Finalize procedures and train staff on data entry Protocols for entering referrals into CWS/CMS.   | June 2005 |
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**Describe how the strategies will build on progress and improve this program/outcome area.**

- Consistent safety, risk, and protective capacity assessment across all social workers throughout the life of a case.
- Increased family & community involvement in decision-making and case planning will improve services to children and families.
- Coordinated case planning for CalWORKS families will assure better service delivery.
- Differential Response will provide earlier intervention/services to families at risk.
- Data/outcomes will become more accurate.

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**Describe systemic changes needed to further support the improvement goals.**

- Expand current practices of inclusion of parents/family/community in case planning, early intervention.
- Expand Differential Response beyond initial target area/population.

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**Describe educational/training needs (including technical assistance) to achieve the improvement goals.**

- SRPC finalized by State/County CWS Redesign teams.
- Training for CWS staff and community partners through Regional Training Academy.
- Clarification/development of consistent methodology for data entry into CWS/CMS.
- Query language used by the State shared with the County.

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**Identify roles of the other partners in achieving the improvement goals.**

- Community, agency, and neighborhood partners' involvement in Differential Response development and implementation in target area/population.
- Community, agency and neighborhood partner participation in training for SRPC.

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**Identify any regulatory or statutory changes needed to support the accomplishment of the improvement goals.**

- Confidentiality: sharing of information with community, agency and neighborhood partners.
- Longer periods of voluntary family maintenance services in order to safely maintain children in the home.
- Expand timeline for case planning to 60 days to allow for family and community participation in case planning.

**Outcome/Systemic Factor:** Length of Time to Exit Foster Care to Reunification

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**County's Current Performance:**

**3E.** Percent reunified within 12 months (Federal Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
01/01/03-12/31/03:	50.5%	64.9%
10/01/02-09/30/03:	40.6%	65.1%
07/01/02-06/30/03:	47.1%	65.3%
<i>National Standard:</i>	76.2%	

**3A.** Percent reunified within 12 months (entry cohort / State Measure):

<u>Stanislaus:</u>		<u>State Average:</u>
01/01/02-12/31/02:	27.0%	35.2%
10/01/01-09/30/02:	20.9%	35.0%
07/01/01-06/30/02:	22.7%	34.6%

Stanislaus County is currently below the State Average and the National Standard for timely reunification.

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**Improvement Goal(s):**

1. Increase the proportion of children who are reunified within twelve months, without increasing recurrence of maltreatment and re-entry into foster care. (Child & Family Services and Probation Department)

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**Strategies:**

- Family to Family TDM (Family & Community Team meetings) at the ninth month to discuss/plan for permanency, including reunification. (Child & Family Services)
- Family Permanency Planning Review meetings at the ninth month to discuss/plan for permanency, including reunification. (Probation)
- Use the Comprehensive Assessment to assist in the determination of when/if safe for the child to return home. (Child & Family Services)
- Evaluate and modify existing agency standards regarding "acceptable housing" for reunification to include alternative, safe living environments, such as clean and sober living environments, family residence, etc. (Child & Family Services)
- Use the Back On Track Validated Risk/Needs Assessment tool at six month intervals to measure progress in decreasing risks and needs. (Probation)

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**Milestones:**

**Timeframes:**

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|--|-----------|
| 1. Finalize SRPC with State, train CWS staff, test, and implement in accordance with CWS Redesign Teams.                           | June 2005 |
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| 2. Increase the use of Team Decision Making (Family and Community Team meetings) at nine months in foster care (or sooner) by 10%. | June 2005 |
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3. Establish and train CWS staff on housing guidelines.

June 2005

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**Describe how the strategies will build on progress and improve this program/outcome area.**

- Early determination of families in which it is safe to return children home using the SRPC.
- Inclusion of parents, family and community partners in developing permanent plans, including reunification.

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**Describe systemic changes needed to further support the improvement goals.**

- Expand current practices of inclusion of parents/family/community in case planning.
- Keep the Courts well informed about the vision and goals regarding reunifying families.

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**Describe educational/training needs (including technical assistance) to achieve the improvement goals.**

- Comprehensive Assessment training for staff and community partners by the Regional Training Academy.
- Training for social workers and foster parents on developing effective working relationships between foster parents and birth parents.
- Query language used by the State shared with the County.

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**Identify roles of the other partners in achieving the improvement goals.**

- Community, agency and neighborhood partner participation in training for SRPC.
- Community, agency and neighborhood partner participation in TDM (Family and Community Team meetings).

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**Identify any regulatory or statutory changes needed to support the accomplishment of the improvement goals.**

- The timelines for reunification are not consistent with the length of time needed to complete Alcohol and Drug Treatment and develop an individualized program of recovery.
- The establishment of funding that supports the development of transitional housing and/or communities for recently reunified families.
- Rent control to keep housing costs in Stanislaus County reasonable such that families are able to obtain safe and affordable housing for their children.
- State support for data collection system for Probation Department.

**Outcome/Systemic Factor:** Timely Social Worker Visits with Child

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**County's Current Performance compared to State Average:**

**2C.** Percent of timely social worker visits with child (State Measure):

Q4 2003		Q3 2003 (revised)		Q2 2003 (revised)	
Stanislaus County:					
Oct. 2003	92.4%	Jul. 2003	88.9%	Apr. 2003	89.5%
Nov. 2003	93.8%	Aug. 2003	89.8%	May 2003	89.8%
Dec. 2003	93.0%	Sep. 2003	90.5%	Jun 2003	90.3%
State Average:					
Oct. 2003	85.7%	Jul. 2003	85.4%	Apr. 2003	84.6%
Nov. 2003	86.3%	Aug. 2003	85.9%	May 2003	85.2%
Dec. 2003	86.8%	Sep. 2003	86.4%	Jun 2003	85.8%

As this is a safety outcome, it is being addressed in this report although a System Improvement Plan (SIP) will not be identified for it. When the Self Assessment was submitted in June 2004, the outcomes for this measure were at approximately 70%. This was greater than the State average, but still below the standard to which the County strives to achieve. Analysis of the data determined that the low percentages may be the result of measurement and data entry errors. The July 2004 Outcome and Accountability Report reflects the corrected methodology and therefore is more accurate. The revised numbers reflect that social worker monthly visits are achieved on approximately 90% of children.

## Summary Assessment:

### A. Discussion of System Strengths and Areas Needing Improvements:

Stanislaus County's Child Welfare program is a progressive and innovative program, and is accredited by the Council on Accreditation. We strive to demonstrate and to provide services to children and families that are consistent with the "best practice" standards of the profession.

Stanislaus County values keeping children with their birth families whenever this can be safely achieved. It has been our custom to provide pre-placement preventative services to families with the goal of maintaining children safely in their home. Even families with prior court action are assessed for in-home services. Although these families are high risk, we recognize that families do change and current circumstances may justify safely leaving children at home with intensive services and support.

Stanislaus County has invested staffing resources into family maintenance, and has also partnered with other Public Agency Divisions to provide intensive in-home services provided by a multi-disciplinary team, known as the Families in Partnership program.

Children are placed in out-of-home care only when they cannot be safely maintained with their families. Some children are removed immediately at referral because of the nature and severity of the issues, while many are removed only after attempts to alleviate safety and risk factors with the children in the care of their parents have not been successful.

When children must be removed, case plans are established early and parents are connected with services that will help them reunify as quickly as possible. Concurrent planning is an important priority of Stanislaus County. Extensive efforts are made to move every child to permanency through reunification, adoption or guardianship. For those youth that we are not able to immediately establish a permanent plan for, our agency continually makes efforts to do so while simultaneously preparing older youth for emancipation.

In many ways our outcomes reflect the values and priorities of Stanislaus County. Although our referral and substantiation rates are above the state average, our rate of foster care placement is approximately half the state average, demonstrating our commitment to keeping families together.

Stanislaus County's strengths include response rates, social worker visitation, timeliness of adoption, keeping siblings together, and keeping children in the least restrictive setting possible.

In Stanislaus County, our social workers respond to immediate referrals within the designated timeframes over 98% of the time. Stanislaus County maintains a standard of a 2-hour response time for all cases assigned as immediate. Exceptions to this time frame are only made when delaying the response is in the best interest of the child, such as in order to interview a child at school. Approximately 94% of 10-day cases are responded to within required timeframes. Cases, which are not responded to by 10 days typically, are the result of absences and other staffing related events.

The timely monthly social worker visits with children outcome, Stanislaus County performed at or above the state average. At the time that the Self-Assessment was submitted, our performance on this outcome was thought to be approximately 71%. Our analysis showed that the true measure of this data should be higher. Our percentages were reduced by a data entry

issue in that guardians receiving foster care payments, without the supervision of the court, did not have case plans for these children, and thus did not have the visitation waiver necessary to exclude these cases from this outcome measure. Without these cases, our compliance was estimated to be at 85% or better. With the revised methodology, corrected in the July 2004 Outcomes and Accountability Report, our performance on this measure is at approximately 90%. As a result, a System Improvement Plan was not created for this measure.

Another area of strength for Stanislaus County, in which we are performing well above the National Standard, is the time to exit foster care to adoption. Fifty-percent of our children who were adopted were in care less than 24 months. Although this percentage goes down to 12.6% on the State measure, which considers only those children who have entered care for the first time, we are still performing at twice the state average.

Because the families of children entering care for the first time typically receive a period of reunification services, the length of time to adoption may easily go beyond 24 months. The termination of parental rights is appealed in an estimated half of all cases. It is not unusual for the appeal to take a year to resolve.

Because Stanislaus County strives to be a “best practice” county, we continuously work to improve even our strong areas. Although our adoption rate exceeds the National Standard and state average, we work diligently to develop new and innovative practices that will improve our outcomes and result in a permanent living situation for “every” child in Stanislaus County.

It is our county’s commitment to identify concurrent planning homes for children when they enter care, pursue permanency and lifelong connections for every older youth in care, and move every child to permanency. Stanislaus County is part of the Adolescent Permanency Project. We are working diligently to modify procedures and practices in order to serve our older youth better and assure that each youth is “connected for life.”

Placing children with their siblings is a significant priority in Stanislaus County. It is our belief that the sibling bond is one of the strongest bonds children develop. We place great importance on keeping children together. Approximately 46% of children are placed with all of their siblings, and 66% are placed with all or at least some of their siblings. We are at or above the state average on this measure. As the size of the sibling group increases, the ability to keep an entire sibling group together becomes more difficult. Predictably, children in relative care are the most likely to be placed with siblings, children in county licensed foster care are the next most likely and children in Foster Family Agencies are the least likely to be placed together.

The reasons that siblings are placed apart are many, but may include the unavailability of a home to accommodate all of the children, behavioral issues or special needs that require one member of a sibling group to require specialized care that cannot accommodate the other siblings. In addition, philosophical differences in some of the county’s Foster Family Agencies may be a factor in keeping siblings together.

Stanislaus County is also strong at keeping children in lower levels of care. Our group home placement rates have been consistently low for a number of years, with approximately 3% of our children placed in that level of care at any one time. Children in group homes or at risk of group home placement are part of our 3015 program. A social worker, with a reduced caseload, and a Children’s System of Care clinician work together with children to keep them out of group homes or step them down to a lower level of care.

In terms of least restrictive environments, our first priority is to place children with their relatives. This has proven more difficult as approval policies have become more stringent. Only about 10% of children are initially placed in a relative home after removal although this increases to 30% for the primary placement. There are many barriers to relative placement, including housing issues, suitable space, criminal histories, and other issues.

Children are placed in county foster homes more often than any other placement type. Through our efforts in the Family to Family Initiative, we are continuously striving to recruit more families in the communities where children are removed, and maintain a child's connections to their community.

An area of struggle is our efforts to recruit and license sufficient families to be concurrent planning families for children. Many children are placed in Foster Family Agencies that do not need a therapeutic level of care.

The recurrence of maltreatment for children in Stanislaus County is an area for further assessment and growth. On the Federal measure, Stanislaus County exceeded the National Standard for recurrence of maltreatment, although we performed slightly below the state average in the past quarter. The rates of recurrence of maltreatment on the state measures for all children and for those who were maintained in their home were higher than the state averages. This reflects data entry practices, but also may result from our commitment to keep children with their families whenever possible. As a CWS Redesign Cohort I county, we anticipate that the Comprehensive Safety, Risk and Protective Capacity Assessment under development will significantly improve our performance on this measure. In addition, the implementation of a Differential Response program will assist in providing community based services to those families that are not responded to or opened for on-going services.

Another area for growth is the rate of abuse in foster care. Our rates of 0.66% in the most recent quarter and 1.86% in the prior quarter are higher than the National standard on this measure. Our analysis has indicated that the predominant issue in county licensed homes is lack of supervision. Referrals for poor supervision are substantiated when abuse between children has occurred in the home, such as inappropriate sexual behavior. As a county accredited by the Council on Accreditation, we monitor issues in foster homes and adjust training to reflect and address any identified issues. PRIDE training was modified this past year to focus on issues of supervision, and Modesto Junior College began providing a regular class for foster parents on supervision and safety issues. Although Foster Family Agency certified families are able to attend this training as well, there may be great variability between agencies in how issues are handled.

The length of time to exit foster care to reunification in Stanislaus County is an area of challenge. On the Federal measure, only 40.6% to 47% were reunified within 12 months. This is significantly lower than the state average of approximately 65%. This low rate of reunification within the twelve-month timeframes may be directly related to our County's emphasis on providing voluntary family maintenance services. Our agency makes every effort to provide services to families through a voluntary program, such as Family Maintenance and our collaborative multi-disciplinary team, Families in Partnership. Because our removal rates are low and in-home services are frequent, the families in which children are removed may be those that are the most resistant to services. Since 88% of children are removed due to neglect, a significant common denominator may be alcohol and drug abuse. The families who do not avail themselves of voluntary services may be the most resistant to treatment. The issues of these families may be so complex and intense that resolving these problems takes time. Since our

Court generally offers reunification services, the time needed for those families to successfully engage, complete treatment and demonstrate sufficient stability may take longer than twelve months.

Housing issues also play a significant role in the timeliness of reunification. Due to escalating housing costs, high unemployment, inadequate low income housing, and other factors of poverty, families experience delays in securing affordable and safe housing to which their children may return.

Issues of data entry have impacted our rates of timely reunification. Although these corrections have been recently made, the outcome measures will not reflect these changes for a while.

When considering a comparison to state average, it is also important to note that some counties may be more inclined to remove children for situations that are less serious than Stanislaus County. A higher removal rate may lend itself to timelier reunification because there are fewer and less intensive issues to address.

Another factor to consider in terms of the appropriateness of reunifying families quickly is the re-entry rates. On the Federal measure, Stanislaus County is below the National Standard for re-entries into care. This is a strength. On the state measure, however, for those families who reunify within 12 months, eighteen-percent re-enter care within twelve months. This is greater than the state average. This percentage declines to eleven percent for those families who reunify within 24 months. This may suggest that the families who have not benefited from pre-placement voluntary services require greater time to succeed in their reunification efforts. When reunified too quickly, the children may be more likely to return to care within twelve months.

The issue of multiple placement changes is one that Stanislaus County has been addressing for over two years through the implementation of the Family to Family Initiative in our county. On the Federal measure, approximately 82% of children who had been in care for twelve months or less had two or fewer placements. This was slightly below both the National Standard and the state average.

Although Stanislaus County has no institutions or receiving "centers," children are traditionally placed in either a receiving home or other temporary home, while relatives are screened, placement matching is conducted and concurrent planning occurs. It is strength, and consistent with the values of Family to Family, that children are placed in a family setting rather than in a shelter or other institution. But as a result of this practice, few children have only one placement. Even one disruption of a placement results in an outcome that exceeds the standard.

As a Family to Family county, Stanislaus is committed to making decisions about removal, placement changes and exit from foster care as a team. Our agency began the Team Decision Making process in February of 2003 for all changes of placement. By including birth parents, family and foster parents in the decision making process, it is anticipated that a better plan for a child's placement is developed when the team shares the decision-making.

An important issue of placement stability as well as siblings being placed together is the variable practices, philosophies and values of Foster Family Agencies (FFA). Although the responsibility of the placement rests with the County social worker, many placements are changed from one home to another within FFAs without the notification or involvement of the county social worker.



MOU's and/or outcome-based contracts with FFAs would be beneficial in holding these agencies accountable for their practices.

Stanislaus County has only four children designated to fall under ICWA. There are no tribal lands within the county, thus placement of children eligible for ICWA is less common than in other counties.

Stanislaus County has many strong partnerships to provide services for emancipating youth. Our ILP program serves many children, including more than half of which are under the jurisdiction of other counties. Our collaborations have resulted in transitional housing for youth 16-18 years, transitional housing for youth over 18 years, specialized training and education opportunities for youth, and an adolescent permanency project.

Stanislaus County has developed positions internally to support and transition youth, as well as identify and nurture lifelong connections for youth. These positions include two ILP permanent placement caseloads that serve adolescents, one aftercare worker who supports and serves youth prior to and after emancipation, and two permanency specialists who search for and help establish lifelong connections for youth.

Stanislaus County has a number of data entry issues that are impacting a number of outcomes. The degree to which the observed outcomes are affected by how data is entered is not entirely certain and may vary from outcome to outcome. Outcomes affected by issues of data entry include recurrence of maltreatment, reunification rates, re-entry into foster care, monthly social worker visitation.

Although there are similarities between child welfare and the Probation Department, the reasons for removal generally are for very different reasons. The Probation Department generally removes youth from their homes because of their continued criminality and the risk posed to the community. Less often, youth are removed because they are at risk of abuse, although these circumstances do occur. The Probation Department does a good job of taking the least restrictive action and exhausting all available resources in the community before removal. When youth are at risk of court ordered out of home placement, Probation makes every effort to identify possible relatives who are willing and able to take the youth prior to the court making removal orders. The Probation Department is strong in the areas of reunification. Generally, minors are returned home in a relatively short period of time, ranging from six to eighteen months, depending upon the needs of the minor.

Case plans are completed in every case where the child is removed. Case plans are reviewed by every minor and parent as long as the parent is available, however, development of the case plans could be improved by increasing the minors and families role in identifying needs and activities to lower risk factors.

The Probation Department usually either returns the minor home or assists in emancipation when the youth is close to adulthood and does not wish to pursue adoption. Those youth who address their criminality issues through out of home placement and who are not able to reunify with their parents because of safety factors are generally processed through WIC 241.1 Hearings to determine whether child welfare or Probation will serve the best interest of the minor and the protection of society. In cases where parental rights should be terminated and adoptions pursued, the practice is for the child welfare agency to take jurisdiction of the minor.

**B. Areas for Further Exploration through the Peer Quality Case Review:**

Although there are many opportunities to learn and grow from peer evaluation, many of the outcomes are being addressed by current efforts of reform and improvement. These include CWS Redesign, Family to Family, CalWORKs and CWS Partnership Project and the Adolescent Permanency Project. All of these efforts have resulted in multiple opportunities to learn from experts and peers in the implementation of these efforts. While many of our outcomes need improvement, it is too early to determine the effectiveness of these reform efforts. Theoretically, the outcomes should improve as a result.

Stanislaus County participates in a peer review system as part of the Council on Accreditation process. Having external peers review cases and evaluate areas of practice promotes continuous quality improvement.